W

WAIT FOR (ONE'S) SHIP TO COME IN
when one gets an unexpected lucky gift, especially money

1. Just give me a little more time to pay back the money I owe you. I don't have it right now, but I will *when my ship comes in*.
2. They keep saying that all their problems will be solved when they get rich. They're always *waiting for their ship to come in*, but it never will.

The expression probably originates from merchants who made their wealth when their goods came into port on a ship.

WALK IN (SOMEONE'S) SHOES
in someone else's situation

1. I wouldn't want to be *in your shoes* when your father finds out about the dent you put in his car.
2. It seems easy to tell others what to do or how to run their lives, but you can't really understand them until you have *walked in their shoes*.

WALKING ON AIR
blissfully happy

1. Lucy met Frank three weeks ago and fell madly in love with him. She's been *walking on air* ever since.
2. If Bruce gets accepted by Harvard Law School on a full scholarship, he will be *walking on air*.

Synonyms: *on cloud nine; seventh heaven*

The expression is always used in the present participle form. The past tense is formed by using "was/were" and the future tense is formed by using "will be."

WASH (ONE'S) HANDS OF (SOMETHING/SOMEONE)
to put something out of one's life or to stop claiming responsibility for something

1. I'm tired of trying to help my brother find a job, and I won't have anything further to do with him. I *wash my hands of the whole business*.
2. They agreed to go into business with their friend, but later found that he treated them unfairly. They decided they wanted nothing more to do with him, so they *washed their hands of him*.

WATER UNDER THE BRIDGE
past and finished; over and done with

1. John and I were married and divorced several years ago. I don't often think of him or wonder where he is now. That part of my life is *water under the bridge*.
2. Mary Ann had a bad experience when she was young, but she doesn't let herself think too much about it. It's *water under the bridge*.

The expression makes the analogy of life as a river of water. The water that has passed under the bridge is that part of a person's life that is past.

WAVE OF THE FUTURE, THE
a strong, growing trend

1. Wireless internet connections are the *wave of the future*. Soon, you won't need any cords at all.
2. It wasn't long ago that miniskirts were the *wave of the future*. Now they are a thing of the past.

WEAR (ONE'S) HEART ON (ONE'S) SLEEVE
to display one's feelings openly

1. Richard has never made a secret of his love for Jane. He has always *worn his heart on his sleeve*.
2. If you want to attract someone, sometimes you have to pretend you don't really care rather than *wearing your heart on your sleeve*.

The expression suggests that a person's heart (and therefore feelings) is exposed for all to see as though it were worn on the sleeve. In medieval Europe, knights used to tie to their sleeves handkerchiefs or ribbons representing the women they loved. In the 1700s, young men would wear the names of their sweethearts on their sleeves for Valentine's Day.

WEAR THE PANTS IN THE FAMILY
to make the major decisions and have the greatest amount of power in a family

1. Shelly and her husband disagreed on where to go on vacation, but they decided to work it out instead of fight. Neither one of them *wears the pants in the family*.
2. Who makes the decisions in your family? Who *wears the pants in your family?*

The expression suggests the stereotype of a traditional family in which the person who wears the pants (the man) is the person who controls the family.

WET BEHIND THE EARS
young and inexperienced

1. Ben is new to this business. He's *wet behind the ears*.
2. They haven't had much experience teaching yet. They're still *wet behind the ears*.

Antonym: *know the ropes*

Similar to: *born yesterday*

The expression comes from that fact that newly born (young) animals are wet at birth. Because of the close creases behind their ears, this area is usually the last to dry.

WET BLANKET
a person who is seen as never wanting to take part in fun activities; a person who ruins a good time

1. Don't invite Jerry to come along. He's a *wet blanket*, and he just ruins everyone's good time.

2. Why don't you relax and have a little fun? Don't be such a *wet blanket*.

This expression appears to come from the practice of using a wet blanket to put out campfires. If one thinks of the fire as being vibrant and exciting, then putting a *wet blanket* over it would extinguish or diminish that excitement.

WET (ONE'S) WHISTLE

to wet one's lips; to have a drink of something

1. After a hard day's work in the sun, I always enjoy *wetting my whistle* with a cold drink.
2. The singer needed to *wet his whistle* before he could continue singing.

WHAT IT'S CRACKED UP TO BE, (NOT)

not as good as its reputation; not as good as it is supposed to be

1. I thought this car was the best model around, but it's not *what it's cracked up to be*. Every week something else goes wrong with it.
2. You've traveled to the Caribbean islands. Are they everything you expected? Are they *what they're cracked up to be?*

The expression is used in the negative or question forms only.

WHEN HELL FREEZES OVER

never

1. My parents don't like me to drive alone. They'll buy me a car *when hell freezes over*.
2. Jake tried to get me to run a race with him, but I already know he's faster than I am. I'll race him *when hell freezes over*.

This expression indicates that something is so unlikely that it will only happen when a place as hot as hell freezes.

WHEN THE CHIPS ARE DOWN

when the situation is critical; when things are going badly

1. Henry is such a good friend. You can always count on him to help you *when the chips are down*.
2. Laura's a pleasant person, but she always seems to disappear when we need to get a project finished. *When the chips are down*, she's never around.

The expression probably originates from a game like poker in which the players use 'chips' to represent money they are betting. To be 'down on chips' would be to not have many, or much money, left.

WHIP/LICK (SOMEONE/SOMETHING) INTO SHAPE

to mold or assemble something into its proper shape quickly

1. The football coach told the players that they had been lazy all summer but that he was going to *lick them into shape* before the first game of the season.
2. We don't have much time left, and this report is due tomorrow. Do you think we have enough time to *whip it into shape*?

This expression comes from the very old belief that bear cubs were born misshapen and had to literally be *licked into shape* by their mothers and fathers. By the late 1600s, this phrase was being used with the figurative meaning it has now.

WHITE-COLLAR WORKER

an office worker

1. This company doesn't employ any manual laborers. Everyone who works for this company is a *white-collar worker.*
2. Dick likes to work outside in the fresh air and sunshine. He wouldn't be very happy as a *white-collar worker* in an office somewhere.

Antonym: *blue-collar worker*

The expression describes the color of the collar (and therefore the business shirt) worn by office workers. A manual laborer would not wear a white shirt because it would get dirty very quickly and be hard to keep clean.

WHITE ELEPHANT

an item that no one wants to buy or that is difficult to get rid of; a costly but useless possession

1. The salesman has been trying to get rid of that car for more than a year. It costs too much to run and insure, so no one wants it—it's a *white elephant*.
2. The department store is having a *white elephant* sale. They've reduced the prices on all the merchandise that they haven't been able to sell.

The item is usually not worthless, but for some reason other than cost, the item is difficult to sell. The origin of the expression is a traditional custom from Siam, present-day Thailand. If a rare albino (white) elephant was captured, it was the property of the emperor, and only he could ride or use the animal. Whenever the emperor wished to ruin someone who displeased him, he would give the man a white elephant. The man would then be forced to feed and care for the animal but could neither use nor destroy it.

WHITE LIE

a minor, polite, or harmless lie

1. When Jenny's parents asked her where she had gone, she told them she had been at the library, but she didn't tell them that she had also gone to the movies. She told her parents a *white lie*.
2. When Carol asked me what I thought of her new dress, I told her she looked good in it. I didn't really like the dress, but since I did not want to hurt Carol's feelings I told her a *little white lie*.

Similar to: *stretch the truth*

The expression suggests that a *white lie* is an innocent or inconsequential lie.

WHITEWASH

to conceal something bad; to make something look better than it really is

1. The boss doesn't want to get rid of his secretary, even though she has made some very costly mistakes. The boss simply keeps *whitewashing* the situation, pretending that her errors are insignificant.
2. The doctor told Susan's parents the truth about their daughter's condition. He felt it wouldn't be fair to *whitewash* the seriousness of Susan's illness.

The expression originates from the paint-like substance called whitewash, made from lime and water, which is used to paint houses and fences cheaply.

WHOLE KIT AND CABOODLE, THE

the entire amount; the whole lot

1. Some strangers came to our yard sale yesterday and bought everything we had. They bought *the whole kit and caboodle*.
2. When the landlord evicted the man, he cleared out all the man's possessions and put them out on the sidewalk, including the man's trash from his wastebaskets! He put out *the whole kit and caboodle*.

Synonym: *lock, stock, and barrel*

The expression is often used to describe items which might not normally be included or which one might expect to be excluded, such as the trash from the wastebaskets (sentence 2). Dating from the late 1800s, *the whole kit and caboodle* is actually the combination of words with a similar meaning. Both *kit* and *caboodle* mean a collection, and the combination into a single phrase is a way of adding emphasis.

WHOLE NINE YARDS, GO THE

the entire amount; (to go) all out

1. The girl's father decided to spare no expense in getting the very best of everything for his daughter's wedding. He *wanted the whole nine yards*.
2. We could save a little money on this dress by using less cloth in the skirt if you don't want to *go the whole nine yards*.

Compare to: *pull out all the stops; go to town; go whole hog*

The term comes from the World War II era, where a fighter pilot's chain of ammunition was twenty-seven feet long (or nine yards). So when he fired all this on the target, he said "I gave it the whole nine yards" — meaning, he gave it all he had.

WILD-GOOSE CHASE

a useless or difficult search

1. First my cousin told me I could buy what I needed at one store; then she sent me to three more. I never did find it. She sent me on *a wild-goose chase*.
2. Tom went all over town from one office to another trying to find out how he could apply to change his citizenship. At the end of the day, he was no closer to finding out, and he had been on *a wild-goose chase*.

This expression is first recorded in Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, and at that time actually referred to horse racing, not birds as the as the phrase might imply. In horse racing a *wild-goose chase* was a type of racing where the horses run in a V-like formation, similar to the way birds fly. Later, the connection to horse racing was lost in use, and people assumed the phrase came from flying geese.

WING IT

to improvise; to do something without planning or preparation

1. Today is the day I'm supposed to present my report to the board of directors, but I'm not at all prepared. When I stand up in front of them, I'm going to have to *wing it*.
2. We don't know how we're going to handle the situation. It's hard to plan for something like this in advance, so we'll just *wing it* and hope for the best.

Similar: *by the seat of (one's) pants*, *play it by ear*

Dating from the late 19th century, *wing it* was originally a theatrical term. Impromptu (unprepared) actors would quickly look over their speaking lines before going onto stage and then someone in the wings (behind the stage curtains) would prompt the actors on their exact lines.

WIPE THE SLATE CLEAN

to set a situation right or erase something bad

1. I know I'm in trouble for misbehaving in class last week, but I want to do better. I want to *wipe the slate clean*.
2. When Kyle was rude to his mother, she sent him to his room, but his punishment was over by dinner time. The *slate had been wiped clean*.

A *slate* is a small chalkboard.

WITH BATED BREATH

hardly breathing at all because of fear, excitement, or other strong emotion

1. Alan took out a small ring. Jennifer knew this was the moment, and she waited *with bated breath* for him to ask her to marry him.
2. The swimmer stood silently *with bated breath* as he waited for the starter's gun to go off.

Bated is a shortened form of *abated*, which means to lessen or put on hold. The first recorded use of *bated* is in 1596 in Shakespeare's play *Merchant of Venice*: "With bated breath, and whisp'ring humblenesse." The expression is used in situations in which someone is waiting tensely for something to happen.

WITH FLYING COLORS

triumphantly; victoriously

1. We weren't sure how the boys would do on their exams, but they passed *with flying colors*.
2. You look so nervous, but I know you can do it. Don't worry; you'll sail through *with flying colors*.

Large ships often sailed into ports with their flags (colors) raised and flying in the wind. This image of glory and victory was eventually extended to any event through which one became triumphant.

WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

someone who presents himself as a harmless person, but who has intentions that are not honorable

1. The police have been looking for that criminal for months. He approaches people and pretends he is selling them valuable stocks that are really worthless. He's a *wolf in sheep's clothing*.
2. John is such a good-looking young man, women are attracted to him quickly. It's easy to see why people who don't know him think he is probably a *wolf in sheep's clothing*, when he is really a gentleman.

The expression comes from Aesop's fable of the wolf that, in order to get close to a flock of sheep it wants to eat, clothes itself in a sheepskin to avoid detection.

WRONG SIDE OF THE TRACKS, COME FROM THE

the poor part of town

1. Sharon knew her parents would never approve of her marriage to Ricky because he *came from the wrong side of the tracks*.
2. Mr. and Mrs. Dawson didn't want their children to attend Smithson High School because it was on the *wrong side of the tracks* and it might be dangerous for the children to walk from home to school by themselves.

The expression suggests that towns or cities are divided into a right (i.e. rich) side and a wrong (i.e. poor) side by the railroad tracks that run through them. The expression is often used to describe where someone comes from.